

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects a person's ability to socialize and communicate with others. ASD can also result in restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities. The term "spectrum" refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills and levels of impairment or disability that people with ASD can have. Some people are mildly impaired by their symptoms, while others are severely disabled.

The prevalence rate for ASD is 1 in 68 children and rising. Boys are four times more likely than girls to develop ASD. ASD crosses racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds equally. Awareness of this disorder and improved screening methods have contributed to the increase in diagnoses in recent years.

Symptoms

Symptoms of ASD start to appear during the first three years of life. Typically, developing infants are social by nature. They gaze at faces, turn toward voices, grasp a finger, and even smile by 2-3 months of age. By contrast, most children who develop autism have difficulty engaging in the give-and-take of everyday human interactions.

Their symptoms may include:

- Delay in language development
- Repetitive and routine behaviors
- Difficulty making eye contact
- Sensory problems
- Difficulty interpreting facial expressions
- Problems with expressing emotions
- Fixation on parts of objects
- Absence of pretend play
- Difficulty interacting with peers
- Self-harm behavior
- Sleep problems

Symptoms of ASD fall on a continuum. This means that the learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of children with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged. Some children with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives, while others need less. With a thorough evaluation, doctors can make a diagnosis to help find the best treatment plan for the child.

Causes

Scientists have not discovered a single cause of ASD. They believe several factors may contribute to this developmental disorder.

- **Genetics.** If one child in a family has ASD, another sibling is more likely to develop it too. Likewise, identical twins are highly likely to both develop ASD if one of them has developed it. Relatives of children with autism show minor signs of

communication difficulties. Scans reveal that people on the autism spectrum have certain abnormalities of the brain's structure and chemical function.

- **Environment.** Scientists are currently researching multiple environmental factors that are thought to play a role in contributing to ASD. Many prenatal factors may contribute to a child's development, such as a mother's health. Other postnatal factors may affect development as well. Despite many claims that have been highlighted by the media, strong evidence has been shown that vaccines do not cause ASD.

Diagnosis

Diagnosing ASD is often a two-stage process. The first stage involves general developmental screening during well-child checkups with a pediatrician. Children who show some developmental problems are referred for additional evaluation. The second stage involves a thorough evaluation by a team of doctors and other health professionals with a wide range of specialties. At this stage, a child may be diagnosed as having ASD or another developmental disorder. Typically, children with ASD can be reliably diagnosed by age 2, though some may not be diagnosed until they are older.

Treatment

Many treatment plans exist for ASD, and each is tailored to every person's unique needs. These can consist of medications, therapy or both. Many therapists work closely with ASD children and adults, using a variety of therapies to help increase their social and communication skills. ASD is treated and managed in several ways:

- **Education and development**, including specialized classes and skills training, time with therapists and other specialists
- **Behavioral treatments**, such as applied behavior analysis (ABA)
- **Medication** for co-occurring symptoms, combined with therapy
- **Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)**, such as supplements and changes in diet

See more at: <http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Autism>

Updated Feb. 2015